

Simmons backs overhauling of U.S. intelligence

■ Simmons speaks to members of the North Stonington Republican Town Committee

By James Schlett
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N. STONINGTON — U.S. Rep. Robert Simmons, R-2nd District, is preparing to back legislation that would implement recommendations made in the recently-released 9/11 Commission Report to overhaul the nation's intelligence agencies.

Five days after a bipartisan congressional commission issued its final report on the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the Republican congressman and one-time intelligence operative said he was planning to co-sponsor legislative implementers for the report after Congress reconvenes in September.

"It's a time for us to start a debate, and it's a debate of how capable we want our intelligence community to be," Simmons told the North Stonington Republican Town Committee Monday. "Hopefully, the publication of this report will begin this debate."

Although Simmons said he was skeptical about the 9/11 Commission when it began its investigation into the attacks, fearing that the 10-member panel would fall prey to partisan politics, he said he was "pleased" with the "fair and balanced" report.

"The least we can do is

respond to these recommendations," he said.

Following up on his February call to make the CIA more effective by hiring more spies, Simmons said he also favored the report's recommendation for the creation of a cabinet-level position that would oversee the nation's intelligence agencies.

The proposed director would brief the president on intelligence issues while possibly operating outside the jurisdiction of 15 federal agencies, such as the CIA and National Security Agency. The Bush administration has indicated that it may try to soon implement some of the report's recommendations through executive order.

"The time has come for that change," said the former CIA operations officer who is seeking reelection in November.

Simmons said that the 9/11 report — coupled with the one issued July 17 by the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee on pre-war information concerning Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction — show how "we've degraded or intelligence resources." In the 1990s, the United States cut about 800 field operatives from various agencies such as the CIA.

The Senate report concluded that the unsubstantiated description of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction capabilities was caused by failures to collect information, not by Bush administration political pressure exerted on the nation's intelligence community.

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